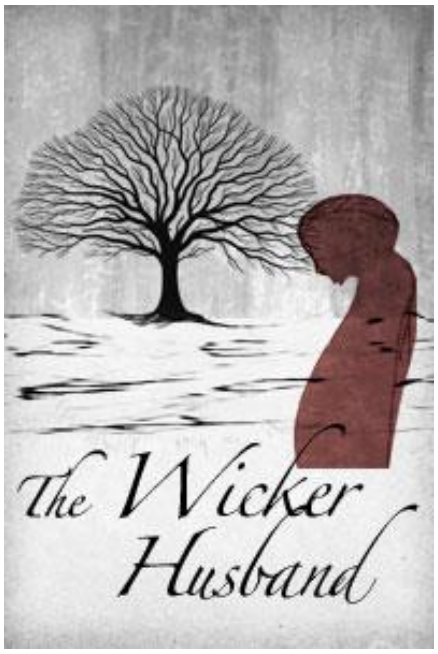

Once upon a time, there was an ugly girl. She was short and dumpy, had one leg a bit shorter than the other, and her eyebrows met in the middle. The ugly girl gutted fish for a living, so her hands smelt funny and her dress was covered in scales. She had no mother or brother, no father, sister, or any friends. She lived in a ramshackle house on the outskirts of the village, and she never complained.

One by one, the village girls married the local lads, and up the path to the church they'd prance, smiling all the way. At the weddings, the ugly girl always stood at the back of the church, smelling slightly of brine. The village women gossiped about the ugly girl. They wondered what she did with the money she earnt. The ugly girl never bought a new frock, never made repairs to the house, and never drank in the village tavern.

Now, it so happened that outside the village, in a great damp swamp, lived an old basket-maker who was famed for the quality of his work. One day the old basket-maker heard a knock on his door. When he opened it, the ugly girl stood there. In her hand, she held six gold coins.

'I want you to make me a husband,' she said.

'Come back in a month,' he replied.

Well, the old basket-maker was greatly moved that the ugly girl had entrusted him with such an important task. He resolved to make her the best husband he could. He made the wicker husband broad of shoulder and long of leg, and all the other things women like. He made him strong of arm and elegant of neck, and his brows were wide and well-spaced. His hair was a fine dark brown, his eyes a greenish hazel.

When the day came, the ugly girl knocked on the basket-maker's door.

'He says today is too soon. He will be in the church tomorrow, at ten,' said the basket-maker. The ugly girl went away, and spent the day scraping scales from her dress.

Later that night, there was a knock on the door of the village tailor. When the tailor opened it, the wicker husband stood outside.

'Lend me a suit,' he said. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to church naked.'

'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the tailor, and ran out the back door.

The tailor's wife came out, wiping her hands. 'What's going on?' she said.

'Lend me a suit,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married tomorrow, and I cannot go to my wedding naked.'

The tailor's wife gave him a suit, and slammed the door in his face.

Next, there was a knock on the door of the village shoe-maker. When the shoe-maker opened it, the wicker husband stood there.

'Lend me some shoes,' he said. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to church barefoot.'

'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the shoe-maker, and he ran out the back door.

The shoe-maker's wife came out, her hands trembling.

'What do you want?' she said.

'Lend me some shoes,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to my wedding barefoot.'

The shoe-maker's wife gave him a pair of shoes, and slammed the door in his face. Next, the wicker husband went to the village inn.

'Give me a drink,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married tomorrow, and I wish to celebrate.'

'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the inn-keeper and all his customers, and out they ran. The poor wicker husband went behind the bar, and poured himself a drink.

When the ugly girl got to church in the morning, she was mighty pleased to find her husband so handsome, and so well turned-out.

When the couple had enjoyed their first night of marriage, the wicker husband said to his wife: 'This bed is broken. Bring me a chisel: I will fix it.'

So like a good husband, he began to fix the bed. The ugly girl went out to gut fish. When she came back at the end of the day, the wicker husband looked at her, and said: 'I was made to be with you.'

When the couple had enjoyed their second night of marriage, the wicker husband said: 'This roof is leaky. Bring me a ladder: I will fix it.'

So, like a good husband, he climbed up and began to fix the thatch. The ugly girl went out to gut fish. When she returned in the evening, the wicker husband looked at his wife, and said: 'Without you, I should never have seen the sun on the water, or the clouds in the sky.'

When the couple had enjoyed their third night of marriage, the ugly girl got ready to out. 'The chimney needs cleaning,' she said, hopefully, 'And the fire could be laid...' But at this, the wicker husband - she was just beginning to learn his expressions - looked completely terrified. From this, the ugly girl came to understand that there are some things you cannot ask a man to do, even if he is very kind.

Over the weeks, the villagers began to notice a change in the ugly girl. If one of her legs was still shorter than the other, her hips moved with a swing that didn't please them. If she still smelt funny, she sang while she gutted the fish. She bought a new frock and wore flowers in her hair. Even her eyebrows no longer met in the middle: the wicker husband had pulled them out with his strong, withered fingers. When the villagers passed the ugly girl's house, they saw it had been painted anew, the windows sparkled, and the door no longer hung askew. You might think that all these changes pleased the villagers, but oh no. Instead, wives pointed out to husbands that their doors needed fixing, and why didn't they offer? The men retorted that maybe if their wives made an effort with new frocks and flowers in their hair, then maybe they'd feel like fixing the house, and everybody grumbled and cursed each other, but secretly, in their hearts, they blamed the ugly girl and her husband.

As to the ugly girl, she didn't notice all the jealousy. She was too busy growing accustomed to married life, and was finding that the advantages of a wicker husband outweighed his few shortcomings. The wicker husband didn't eat, and never complained that his dinner was late. He only drank water, the muddier the better. She was a little sad that she could not cook him dinner like an ordinary man, and watch him while he ate. In the cold nights, she hoped they would sit together close to the fire, but he preferred the darkness, far from the flames. The ugly girl got in the habit of calling across the room all the things she had to say to him. As winter turned to spring, and rain pelted down, the wicker husband became a little mouldy, and the ugly girl had to scrub him down with a brush and a bottle of vinegar. Spring turned to summer, and June was very dry. The wicker husband complained of stiffness in his joints, and spent the hottest hour of the day lying in the stream. The ugly girl took her fish-gutting, and sat on the bank, keeping him company.

Eventually the villagers were too ridden with curiosity to stand it any longer. There was a wedding in the village: the ugly girl and her husband were invited. At the wedding, there was

music and dancing, and food and wine. As the musicians struck up, the wicker husband and the ugly girl went to dance. The villagers could not help staring: the wicker husband moved so fine. He lifted his dumpy wife like she was nought but a feather, and swung her round and round. He swayed and shimmered; he was elegant, he was graceful. As for the ugly girl: she was in heaven.

The women began to whisper behind their hands. Now, the blacksmith's wife was boldest, and she resolved to ask the wicker husband to dance. When the music paused she went towards the couple. The ugly girl was sitting in the wicker husband's lap, so he creaked a little. The blacksmith's wife was about to tap the wicker husband on the shoulder, but his arms were wrapped round the ugly girl.

'You are the only reason that I live and breathe,' the wicker husband said to his wife.

The blacksmith's wife heard what he said, and went off, sulking. The next day there were many frayed tempers in the village.

'You've got two left feet!' shouted the shoe-maker's wife at her husband.

'You never tell me anything nice!' yelled the blacksmith's wife.

'All you do is look at other women!' shouted the baker's wife, though how she knew was a mystery, as she'd done nothing but stare at the wicker husband all night. The husbands fled their homes and congregated in the tavern.

'T'aint right,' they muttered, 'T'isn't natural.'

'E's showing us up.'

'Painting doors.'

'Fixing thatch.'

'Murmuring sweet nothings.'

'Dancing!' muttered the blacksmith, and they all spat.

'He's not really a man,' muttered the baker. 'An abomination!'

'He don't eat.'

'He don't grumble.'

'He don't even fart,' added the tailor, gloomily.

The men shook their heads, and agreed that it couldn't go on.

Meanwhile the women congregated in each other's kitchens.

'It's not right,' they muttered. 'Why does she deserve him?'

'It's an enchantment,' they whispered. 'She bewitched him.'

'She'll be onto our husbands next, I expect,' said the baker's wife. 'We should be careful.'

'She needs to be brought down a peg or two.'

'Fancies that she's better than the rest of us, I reckon.'

'Flowers in her hair!!'

'Did you see her dancing?'

And they all agreed that it couldn't go on.

One day the wicker husband was on his way back from checking the fish-traps, when he was accosted by the baker.

'Hello,' said the baker. The wicker husband was a little surprised: the baker never bothered to speak to him. 'You made an impression the other night.'

'I did?' said the wicker husband.

'Oh yes,' continued the baker. 'The women are all aflutter. Don't you ever think - well...'

'What?' said the wicker husband, completely confused.

'Man like you,' said the baker. 'Could do well for himself. A lot of opportunities...' He leaned forward, so the wicker husband recoiled. The baker's breath smelt of dough, which he found unpleasant. 'Butcher's wife,' added the baker meaningfully. 'Very taken. I know for a fact that he's not at home. Gone to visit his brother in the city. Why don't you go round?'

'I can't,' said the wicker husband. 'My wife's waiting for me at home.' And he strode off, up the lane. The baker went home, annoyed.

Now the wicker husband, who was too trusting, thought less of this of this than he should, and did not warn his wife that trouble was brewing. About a week later, the ugly girl was picking berries in the hedgerow, when the tailor's wife sidled up. Her own basket was empty, which made the ugly girl suspicious.

'My dear!' cried the tailor's wife, fluttering her hands.

'What d'you want?' said the ugly girl.

The tailor's wife wiped away a fake tear, and looked in both directions. 'My dear,' she whispered. 'I'm only here to warn you. Your husband - he's been seen with other women.'

'What other women?' said the ugly girl.

The tailor's wife fluttered her hands. This wasn't going as she intended. 'My dear, you can't trust men. They're all the same. And you can't expect - a man like him, and a woman like you - frankly -'

The ugly girl was so angry that she hit the tailor's wife with her basket, and ran off, up the lane. The ugly girl went home, and - knowing more of cruelty than her husband did - thought on this too much and too long. But she did not want to upset her husband, so she said nothing.

The tailor's wife came home fuming, with scratches all over her face. That night, the wives and husbands of the village all agreed - for once - that something drastic had to be done.

A few days later the old basket-maker heard a knocking at his door. When he opened it, the villagers stood outside. Right on cue, the tailor's wife began to weep, pitifully.

'What's the matter?' said the old basket-maker.

'She's childless,' said the baker's wife, sniffing.

'Not a son,' said the tailor, sadly.

'Or a daughter.'

'No-one to comfort them in their old age,' added the butcher.

'It's breaking their hearts,' went on the baker.

'So we've come to ask -'

'If you'll make us a baby. Out of wicker.'

And they held out a bag of gold.

'Very well,' said the old basket-maker. 'Come back in a month.'

Well, one dusky day in autumn, the ugly girl was sitting by the fire, when there came a knock at the door. The wicker husband opened it. Outside, stood the villagers. The tailor's wife bore a bundle in her arms, and the bundle began to whimper.

'What's that?' said the ugly girl.

'This is all your fault,' hissed the butcher, pointing at the wicker husband.

'Look what you've done!' shouted the baker.

'It's an abomination,' sneered the inn-keeper. 'Not even human!'

The tailor pulled away the blanket. The ugly girl saw that the baby was made of wicker. It had the same shaped nose, the same green eyes that her husband did.

'Tell me it's not true!' she cried.

But the wicker husband said nothing. He just stared at the baby. He had never seen one of his own kind before, and now - his heart filled up with tenderness. When the ugly girl saw this on his face, a great cloud of bitterness came upon her. She sank to the floor, moaning.

'Filthy, foul, creature!' cried the tailor. 'I should burn it!' He seized the baby, and made to fling it into the blaze. At this, the wicker husband let out a yell. Forward he leapt.

The ugly girl let out a terrible cry. She took the lamp, and flung it straight at her husband. The lamp burst in shards of glass. Oil went everywhere. Flames began to lick at the wicker husband's chest, up his neck, into his face. He tried to beat at the flames, but his fingers grew oily, and burst into fire. Out he ran, shrieking, and plunged into the river.

'Well, that worked well,' said the butcher, in a satisfied manner.

The villagers did not spare a second glance for the ugly girl, but went home again to their dinners. On the way, the tailor's wife threw the wicker baby in the ditch. She stamped on its face. 'Ugh,' she said. 'Horrible thing.'

The next day the ugly girl wandered the highways, weeping, her face smeared in ashes.

'Have you seen my husband?' she asked passing travellers, but they saw madness in her eyes, and spurred their horses on. Dusk fell. Stumbling home, scarce knowing where she was, the ugly girl heard a sound in the ditch. Kneeling, she found the wicker baby. It wailed and thrashed, and held up its hands. The ugly girl saw in its face her husband's eyes, and her husband's nose. She coddled it to her chest and took it home.

Now, the old basket maker knew nothing of all this. One day, the old man took it into his head to see how his creations were faring. He walked into town, and knocked on the tailor's door. The wife answered.

'How is the baby?' he said.

'Oh that,' she said. 'It died.' And she shut the door in his face. The old basket-maker walked on, till he came to the ugly girl's place. The door was closed, the garden untended, and dirt smeared the windows. The old basket-maker knocked on the door. No-one answered, though he waited a very long time.

The old-basket maker went home, disheartened. He was walking the long dark road into the swamp, when he heard something in the rushes. At first he was afraid: he wrapped his scarf closer round his face. But the thing seemed to follow him. From time to time, it groaned.

'Who's there?' called the old man.

Out onto the roadway staggered the most broken and bedraggled, the most pathetic and pitiful thing. The old basket-maker stared at what was left of the wicker husband: his hands

consumed by fire, his face equally gone. Dark pits of scorched wood marred his chest. Where he had burnt, he had started to rot.

'What have they done to my children?' cried the old basket-maker.

The wicker husband said nothing: he had lost his tongue.

The old basket-maker took the wicker husband home. As daylight came, the old basket-maker sat down to repair him. But as he worked, his heart grew hot with anger.

'I made you, but I failed you,' he said. 'I will not send you there again.'

Eventually, the wicker husband looked as good as new, though the smell of burning still clung. But as the days passed, a damp black mould began to grow on him. The old basket-maker pulled out the rotting withies and replaced them. But it seemed useless: the wicker husband rotted from the inside, outwards.

At last, the old basket-maker saw there was nothing else to be done. He took up his travelling cloak, set out at night, and passed through the village. He came to the ugly girl's house. In the garden, wreathed in filth, stood the ugly girl, cuddling a child. She was singing the saddest lullaby he had ever heard. The old basket-maker saw that the child was the one he'd made, and his heart softened a little. He stepped out of the shadows.

'Why do you keep the baby,' he said, 'when you cast your husband from home?'

The ugly girl cried out, to hear someone speak to her.

'It is all I have left of my husband,' she said at last. 'Though it is proof he betrayed me, I could not leave it in the ditch to die.'

'You are a fool,' he said. 'It was I that made the child. Your husband is innocent.'

At this, the ugly girl let out a cry, and ran towards the river. But old basket-maker caught her arm. 'Wait - I have something to show you,' he said.

The ugly girl walked behind him, through the swamp where the water sucked and burbled, carrying the baby. As the sun rose, she saw that its features were only those of the old basket-maker, who, like any maker, had passed down his face to his creations.

When they came to the dwelling, the ugly girl opened the door, and saw her husband, sitting in darkness.

'It cannot be you,' she said. 'You are dead. I know: I killed you myself.'

'I was made for you alone,' said the wicker husband, 'But you threw me away.'

The ugly girl let out a cry so loud, birds surfaced from the marches for miles around, and threw herself at her husband's feet.

A few days later, the villagers were surprised to see the old basket-maker standing outside the church.

'I have something to say,' he said. 'Soon I will retire. But first, I am making my masterwork - a woman made of wicker. If you want her, you can have her. But you must bring me a gift for my retirement. Whoever brings me the best gift can have the wicker woman.'

Then he turned round and went back to the swamp.

Behind him, the villagers began to whisper. Hadn't the wicker husband been tall and graceful? Hadn't he been a hard worker? Hadn't he been handsome, and eager to please his wife?

Next day, the entire village denied any interest in the wicker lady, but secretly began to plan. Men eyed up prize cows; women sneaked open jewellery boxes.

'That wicker husband worked like a slave, and never even ate,' said the shoe-maker's wife to her husband. 'Get me the wicker woman as a servant, I'll live like a lady, never lift a finger.'

'That wicker husband never quarrelled with anyone, never even raised his voice. Not like you, you old fishwife,' the inn-keeper said to his wife.

'That wicker husband never tired, and never had a headache,' said the butcher to the baker. 'Imagine...!'

'Lend me a shilling, cousin,' said the shoe-maker's wife. 'I need a new petticoat.'

'I can't,' lied the blacksmith's wife. 'I spent it on medicine. The child was very sick.'

'I need that back-rent you owe me,' said the butcher, who owned the tailor's house.

'Been a very bad season in the tailoring trade,' muttered the tailor. 'You'll get it soon.'

The butcher went into town, hired a lawyer, and got the tailor evicted from his house. The tailor and his wife had to go and live in the shoe-maker's shed.

'But what are you going to do with the empty house?' asked the butcher's wife.

'Nothing,' said the butcher, who thought the place would do admirably to keep a mistress. The butcher's wife and the tailor's wife had a fight in the market, and went home with black eyes. In the tavern, no-one spoke, but only eyed each other, suspiciously. The lawyer was still in town. Rumour had it that the tailor's wife was suing for divorce: the inn-keeper's wife had her husband arrested after she found the stairs had been greased. In short, the fields went uncut, the cows went unmilked, ovens uncleaned: the village was obsessed.

When the day came, the old basket-maker came to town, and sat on the churchyard wall. The villagers brought their gifts. First the tailor, who'd made a luxurious coat. Next the

miller, bringing twelve sacks of grain. The baker made the most extravagant cake; the carpenter brought a table and chairs, the carter a good strong horse. The blacksmith's wife staggered up with a cheese the size of a millwheel. Her cousin, the tailor's wife, arrived with a bag of gold.

'Where d'you get that, wife?' said her husband, amazed.

'Never you mind,' she snapped.

The inn-keeper's wife wasn't there: she'd slipped while climbing the stairs.

Last to come was the butcher. He'd really outdone the others: two oxen, four cows, and a dozen sheep.

The old-basket maker looked around him. 'Well,' he said. 'I think the prize goes to... the butcher. I'll just take these and be back, with the wicker lady.'

The butcher was so pleased, spittle ran from his mouth.

'Can I have my grain back?' said the miller.

'No no,' said the old man. 'That wasn't the bargain.' And he began to load all the goods onto the horse. The villagers would have fallen on each other, fighting, but they were so desperate to see the wicker lady, they just stood there, to wait.

It was dusk by the time the basket-maker returned. The wicker woman was seated on the horse, shrouded in a cloak, veiled like a bride. From under the cloak, white flowers fell. As she passed the villagers, a most marvellous smell drifted down.

The butcher stood outside the tailor's old house. He'd locked his wife in the coal cellar in preparation.

The old basket-maker held out a hand, and helped the lady dismount. The butcher smelt her fragrance. From under the veil, he thought he saw her give him a saucy glance. He was so excited, he hopped from foot to foot.

The wicker lady lifted her veil: she took off her cloak. The butcher stared at her. The wicker lady was short of stature and twisted of limb, her face was dark and rough. But worse than that - from head to foot, she was covered in thorns.

'What have you done?' shrieked the butcher.

'Ah,' said the old basket-maker. 'The wicker husband was made of willow. Willow is the kindest of trees: tall, elegant, pliable, of much assistance in easing pain. But I saw that you did not like him. Therefore I made you the wicker lady from blackthorn. Blackthorn is cold, hard, and thorny - it will not be killed, either by fire or frost.'

The villagers would have fallen on the old basket-maker there and then, had not the wicker lady stepped forward. She seized hold of the butcher and reached up to kiss him. The

butcher let out a howl. When he pulled his lips away, they were shredded and tattered: blood ran down his chin. Then, with a bang, the butcher's wife broke out of the coal cellar, and ran down the road. Seeing the wicker lady kissing her husband, she screamed, and fell on her. The two of them rolled in the gutter, howling and scratching.

Just then, the lawyer piped up. 'Didn't you check the details first?' he said. 'It's very important. You should always check the small print.'

The men of the village took their butcher's knives and pitchforks and tailoring shears, and chased the lawyer out of town. When they'd run out of breath, they stopped.

'That old fraud the basket-maker,' said the baker. 'He tricked us.'

So they turned round and began to go back in the other direction, on the road into the swamp. In the darkness they stumbled and squelched, lost their way and nearly drowned. It was light by the time they came to the old basket-maker's dwelling, but the old basket-maker, the wicker husband, the ugly girl and the baby, as well as all the villagers' goods, had already upped, and gone.